

An unforgettable festive experience awaits the culturally inclined. Join Fareeda Kanga on a whirlwind tour of the world's iconic Christmas markets

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Which one of us doesn't get nostalgic around Christmas time? Personally I slip into 'fantasy mode' as the aroma of eggnog and sweet strains of carollers assail the senses. If you are a Nativity junkie, then a trip to some of the most beautiful medieval cities of Europe enveloped in festive fervour is a must on any traveller's list.

VERVE



CHESTNUTS AND CHOIRS

Christmas in Germany is a grand affair. The cities and sleepy towns come alive a good four weeks before the festival. Travel through most German towns and your olfactory senses will be assailed by regional delicacies including various sausages and meats to sweets and bread, delicious glühwein (mulled wine), roasted almonds, grilled sausages (bratwurst) and Christmas spices. In addition to the culinary delights, shopping possibilities are endless, ranging from hand-made Christmas ornaments and other gifts to festive accessories and fashion.

In Cologne, famed for its cathedral, we are transfixed as we watch craftsmen at work in 160 beautiful wooden pavilions and sample dozens of delicious treats. The Christmas market on Neumarkt Square, is pure phantasmagoria while its counterpart on Rudolfplatz Square is like a fairy-tale come true for children.

We are informed that myth and legend suggest that the market in the old quarter, is the home of the Cologne gnomes; be prepared for a bucolic affair, and try not to get too high-spirited on beer and wine! A haven for gourmets, the baked goods such as Aachener Printen, Lebkuchen, Spekulatius, Christstollen, as well as other foods, such as chocolate figures, cotton candy, roasted chestnuts, toasted almonds, and baked potatoes are a must try.

If you are travelling with kids then it's worth dropping in to see the entertainers, musicians and jesters who set the tone at the medieval Christmas market on the banks of the Rhine outside the chocolate museum. Kids go crazy eating Stollen, a fruitcake with bits of candied fruits, raisins, walnuts and almonds and spices such as cardamom and cinnamon, sprinkled with icing sugar. Often there's a core of marzipan.

Nativity exhibitions, concerts and a wide choice of Christmas shopping are also part of the festive fun in Cologne. Another German market around this time that bears mention is located in Leipzig and was on my wish list for its mouth-watering array of fine orchestral and choral programs – it is a paradise for music lovers as I discovered. Spoilt for choice, there is much to choose from in the form of daily trumpet fanfares, Christmas concerts by St Thomas' choir and performances of Bach's Christmas Oratorio in the city's churches.



Leipzig's Christmas market has its roots steeped in tradition back to 1767, being one of the largest and most beautiful in Germany, with around 250 stalls on the city's historical market square. The attractions we enjoyed included the fairytale forest, the Old Leipzig medieval market and the world's largest free-standing Advent calendar.

MOZART AND MOCHA

My all-time favourite Christmas was spent in Vienna.... The ambience of the city is lavish and larger-than-life: Lipizzaner stallions cavorting to Mozart; a sheet of powdery white snow covering the Empress Maria Theresa's statue; in the State Park, Johann Strauss standing tall amongst a green background; there is something for everyone.



Frankly just strolling down the streets is a festive affair. Personally, I love sitting in one of the famed Viennese coffeehouses especially at Christmas time. This is a place where locals (and tourists like myself) 'hang out' for hours lingering over a cup of mocha and a pastry topped with wallops of Schlagobers (whipped cream) – contemplating the world or just watching it go by.

The Magic of Advent in Vienna enchants visitors with its romantic and nostalgic charm. Attractions included the glittering tree decorations in the adjacent Rathauspark and more than 150 stands laden with Christmas gifts, candies and punch. There is also a Christmas workshop for the little ones.

Each year the traditional Altwiener Christkindmarkt Christmas fair awaits with high-quality handcrafted pieces, glass decorations, cribs and ceramics on one of the First District's prettiest squares. If you love ornaments for your tree or crystal objects d'art then don't miss this attraction.

GERANIUMS AND PROPOSALS

It doesn't get better than this... Shopping for high-end fashion in the luxe capital of the world isn't a bad way to spend Christmas. And the icing on the cake? All your favourite brands on discount!

In December, Paris sparkles with lights. As part of the Christmas shopping marketing campaign this year, the Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau will be giving Parisians and visitors a free Paris City Passport Shopping 2012 to ensure that they have a memorable festive season.

This passport entitles the holder to 10 per cent reductions in 70 renowned shops such as Georges Rech, Aigle, Franck et Fils, Nina Ricci, Bodum, La Bagagerie.... Nominative and valid for the three consecutive days, it is normally given to shoppers for free after purchases of tourist products of €80 or more.

Get set to sparkle on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré as you clutch your new Lacroix handbag. Santa's wish list comes true.

If Paris is the city of style and romance then Strasbourg is its cultural cousin. This city in North-eastern France, just a few kilometres from the Franco-German border is decorated with never-ending canals, black-and-white timber-framed buildings with lop-sided roofs and balconies overflowing with geraniums.

Through its Christmas Market, Strasbourg upholds its centuries-old status as a market town, but it also strives to promote the city's humanist values.



And that is what the concept of 'Strasbourg, Capital of Christmas' – this year celebrating its 21st anniversary – is all about: proposing, in addition to the traditional markets in the city's streets, hundreds of events aiming to carry on the tradition and a spirit of openness, sharing and generosity (concerts in the churches, exhibitions, meetings, actions of solidarity and more).

Our guide, Michelle explains that this year, the Strasbourg Christmas Market is celebrating its 443rd year. With its four centuries of tradition, it is the oldest Christmas market in France, and one of the oldest in Europe!

Amidst the scents of spices, cinnamon, mulled wine and bredle, a profusion of garlands, Christmas decorations, cribs, nativity scene figures, Advent wreaths, traditional pottery, tablecloths, decorations and handmade toys fill the rows of the colourful markets. French food such as foie gras and the famous dried fruitcake are on offer as well as smoked salmon and crêpes with a multitude of gooey fillings.

The atmosphere that prevails in Strasbourg as Christmas approaches is unique. The city is adorned in its most beautiful finery; the streets and squares are richly decorated... At nightfall, the magic of their different lights up and the streets and squares, all connected by a network of light, give off their different scents amid sparkling decors. The 'Carré d'Or' is especially spectacular, such as the Rue des Hallebardes, with its magnificent crystal chandeliers.

Throughout December, Strasbourg is the most illuminated city in Europe.

And at the heart of this latticework of light, the cathedral stands proud, shining like a jewel in the crown.

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